



especially in December, stimulates vivid olfactory memories of the anticipation that filled our house at Christmas time. It was only when I was in college, unable to return home for the holidays, that I had a revelation.

I knew when I chose to go to college in Maine, far from Florida, that going back home was likely to be a problem. A bus trip was too long in my mind. Both the flight and the train to Florida usually cost more money than I had. I accepted this financial fact. It did not make me sad or nostalgic. I told myself I had to figure out how to make the best use of the resources I had – and financially they were decidedly limited. Perhaps most importantly, I had promised myself that I was not going to be envious of others or wallow in a state of shoulda, coulda, woulda.

During my first year in college, my adviser, Professor Richard Chittim, invited me to have Christmas dinner with his family – his wife Mary and their children David, Wendy, and Nancy. It was a beautiful snowy day in Maine – like a perfect winter postcard – when he picked me up at my dorm. The meal was traditional and delicious in every way, especially the cranberry sauce with orange zest, which I had never had before. Rarely had I felt so warmly embraced by such a kind family. I gave the family a small picture book (the one little gift I could afford) and each of them commented on it with delight. The family gave me a book of pictures of different regions of Maine and four dinner napkins in a red and white fabric with a stylised reindeer and snowflakes pattern that Mrs Chittim had hand-stitched.

After the meal we sat around and talked. They asked me questions about my background (it was my first time meeting the children) and I told them about how my family celebrated Christmas in Florida. I talked at length about the cakes and pies. As I shared my memories sitting in my college adviser's beautiful home, I could feel something welling up in me. It was like an epiphany.

I realised that my mother and grandmother had lovingly shielded us from knowing how poor we were. They had artfully focused our anticipation and our dreams on the food they were making for each of us rather than on the material items they could not afford to buy. They always made it clear that we would get just two gifts. That never changed. But it was with the cakes and pies that we felt and tasted the holiday spirit.

Mrs Chittim must have sensed this, even though I did not mention my revelation. It was too personal, too emotional, too moving for me to talk about. Two or three days later, my college adviser asked me to come by his office. When I arrived, he gave me a lemon pound cake wrapped in wax paper his wife had made – just for me.

I could barely say thank you as he put his arm around my shoulders. It was the first of many lemon cakes Mary Chittim would make for me during and after my college years. Some years later during one of my visits home, I asked my mother and grandmother about my earlier cakes-and-pies epiphany. Like many older people who recognised that finally you had absorbed their earlier, albeit indirect, wisdom, they just smiled. I could tell they were pleased that I asked the question, but they were not going to give me a direct answer. They did not need to.

I then asked: 'Why didn't you make two of our favourite desserts for each of us? You know how much I love apple pie, too, and it's perfect for Christmas.' My mother responded: 'Do you know how much work that would have been with seven children!' My grandmother, with a little chuckle, revealed their real intent: 'We had to keep all seven of you children hopeful, that next year we just might make two each for you. That way, you children always had something to imagine, something to fantasise about.'

To have actually made more for us may have taken away their biggest gift, which was hope.

MY CHRISTMAS

Alvin Hall



Cakes and pies baked with love a recipe for hope in hard times

Christmas presents always took a back seat to certain foods when I was growing up. My parents gave each child only two presents. When we were young, they were a toy (usually something related to comic book or cartoon figures that fascinated us) and an item of clothing to wear to Sunday services. (In the community where I grew up, wearing really nice, crisply ironed clothing to church on Sundays was mandatory – a sign of respect.) When we got older, the standard Christmas presents became two items of clothing – one for school and one for church.

While we enjoyed the surprise of presents under the Christmas tree like all kids do, it was the cakes and pies that each of us looked forward to eagerly. My mother

and grandmother made each of our favourite cakes or pies for the holidays. I first became aware of this when there were four of us, my brother, my two sisters and me. My brother liked buttery pound cake. One sister liked sweet potato pie. The other sister liked dark chocolate cake. I liked lemon cake. (That's not quite true. I loved lemon cake – and still do!) Eventually there would be seven children, so the types of cakes kept expanding and changed often as our various tastes evolved.

During the two days before Christmas, the house would be filled with the smell of cakes and pies baking. Each of us would wait to see whose cake was being made. Once a cake was in the oven, we were permitted to eat the remaining batter by using our fingers to scrape the interior of the bowl. This act was a tease of the full treat to come.

In the kitchen was a standalone cabinet my parents called 'the safe.' It had shelves and two doors with metal screening in the central panels. When each cake was finished, some with appropriate icing, it was placed on a shelf in the safe. I recall that we counted them again and again, making sure there was one for each of us. (I have often wondered whether my parents first taught us numbers by having us count the number of cakes and pies on the safe's shelves.)

To this day, the smell of baking cakes and pies,